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ANTA 604 – PERSONAL SUPERVISED PROJECT

**‘Who wouldn’t come down here to see such sights as these!’:**

**The Antarctic Environment and the Diary of Ritchie Simmers**

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Ritchie Simmers began his diary entry for Thursday 29 January 1931: 'Were I truly the realist which ... I [recently] claimed to be I would merely enter for today "Gale, high sea" and leave it at that but the conditions have been bad enough to deserve more comment than that'.<sup>1</sup> Simmers was the meteorologist on the British, Australian, and New Zealand Antarctic Research Expedition (BANZARE). The expedition consisted of two voyages to the Antarctic on the *SS Discovery*, of Robert Falcon Scott fame, in the austral summers of 1929-1930 and 1930-1931, led by Sir Douglas Mawson. Simmers kept a diary during both voyages, and in his entry above he captures two of the major themes of the diary as a whole: his conscious construction of the diary's form, held in his overt rejection of a short entry (albeit with a theatrical wink at the reader); and his engagement with and construction of the Antarctic environment, in his interest in describing the stormy weather in greater depth. This study seeks to explore, through his expedition diary, how Simmers engaged with the Antarctic environment and how he recorded that engagement in his diary.

This engagement, and its rendering in the diary, are important as they comprise a significant part of the environment itself. People create an

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<sup>1</sup> Ritchie G. Simmers, manuscript, 29 January 1931, MS271, Box 1, Folder 1, Canterbury Museum Documentary Research Centre. For the rest of the essay Simmers' diaries will be cited only with the date of the day's entry. Entries from November 1929 to 19 December 1929 are from MS271, Box 1, Folder 1. Entries from 20 December 1929 to 2 March 1930 are from MS271, Box 1, Folder 2. Entries from 10 October 1930 to 29 January 1931 are from MS271, Box 1, Folder 3. Entries from 9 February 1931 to 18 February 1931 are from MS271, Box 1, Folder 4.

environment socially and culturally as much as they discover it physically. Geoff Park defined the term 'landscape' as integrating

two senses: the pattern of landforms, plants, human structures, phenomena, etc that we "see" when we look at a stretch of country; and the experiences, imaginations, beliefs and ideals which inform the looking and other interactions.<sup>2</sup>

Doreen Massey agrees, arguing that any space is 'the product of interrelations', 'constituted through interactions, from the global to the intimately tiny'.<sup>3</sup> Eric Pawson and Tom Brooking sum it up concisely: 'The making of environments is a social process'.<sup>4</sup> William Cronon reminds us not to get carried away: the non-human world is hardly 'somehow unreal or a mere figment of our imagination'. However, 'the way we describe and understand that world is so entangled with our own values and assumptions that the two can never be fully separated'.<sup>5</sup> Simmers himself was aware of this subjectivity in his engagement with the Antarctic environment, describing the continent's endless coastline as '*to us* [a] wonderland'.<sup>6</sup> Since the way one constructs an environment determines how one behaves towards and within it, gaining insight into this process is crucial to understanding why people have thought about, felt towards, and acted in certain environments the ways they have – and perhaps continue to.

In this situation, where a young man (and indeed an entire society) came face to face with an unfamiliar environment, much of this engagement was an attempt to make that place familiar and understandable. While adapting themselves to a new environment, Simmers and his colleagues also attempted to adapt the new environment to themselves. As well as a place of 'anxiety and adventure', writes Brigid Hains, the Antarctic was 'a place to be

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<sup>2</sup> Geoff Park, *Nga Uruora: The Groves of Life*, Wellington, 1995, p. 337.

<sup>3</sup> Doreen Massey, *For Space*, London, Thousand Oaks, and New Delhi, 2005, p. 9.

<sup>4</sup> Eric Pawson and Tom Brooking, 'Introduction' in Eric Pawson and Tom Brooking (eds.), *Environmental Histories of New Zealand*, Melbourne, 2002, p. 3.

<sup>5</sup> William Cronon, 'Introduction: In Search of Nature', in William Cronon (ed.), *Uncommon Ground: Toward Reinventing Nature*, London and New York, 1995, p. 25.

<sup>6</sup> 12 January 1930 (emphasis mine).

tamed, domesticated, known and possessed'.<sup>7</sup> In colonial situations such as New Zealand and Australia men such as Simmers may have cleared bush, built fences, and introduced crops and animals to create familiarity in a new environment. As these sorts of options were unavailable to them, the BANZARE expeditioners used, primarily, the written word to ensnare and mould the environment into a more familiar and understandable form. 'Language could be cast like a net across the landscape,' writes Hains,

drawing it closer to [the expeditioners'] life-world. Landscape could be encompassed in well-established metaphors and meanings .... And in turn the landscape prompted new metaphors, as the tools of language were reshaped to fit new ends.<sup>8</sup>

Studying Simmers' diary provides a valuable glimpse into this process of engagement with, and familiarisation of, an environment through writing. Furthermore the self-awareness of his diary, in which he consistently acknowledges the conventions of the form he is creating, thereby breaking any sense that the reader is peering directly into his thoughts and feelings at the moment of the experience he is describing, allows the textuality of the process to be more deeply interrogated.

The essay proceeds in four sections. First, a sketch is provided of Simmers and BANZARE, providing context for the rest of the essay, which continues by discussing Simmers' diary as a constructed text. The two major voices with which Simmers records his engagement with the Antarctic environment are then explored: one literary, Romantic, emotive, and consciously subjective; and the other scientific, analytical, controlling and, for Simmers, 'objective'. These two voices or modes of description and engagement are deeply related and intertwined, with any one diary entry's categorisation as one or the other being somewhat artificial. For the purposes of this study, however, it is valuable to (temporarily) separate them.

Ritchie Gibson Simmers was born in Timaru in 1905. He attended Timaru Boys' High School, where he was dux, and studied physics at

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<sup>7</sup> Brigid Hains, *The Ice and the Inland: Mawson, Flynn, and the Myth of the Frontier*, Melbourne, 2002, p. 10.

<sup>8</sup> *ibid*, p. 31.

Canterbury University College, completing a Master's degree with honours in science in 1929.<sup>9</sup> He received an impressive haul of scholastic awards during his education, including a nomination for a Rhodes scholarship, and after



**Image 1.** *Simmers in 1929, having been announced as the meteorologist for BANZARE* (Evening Post, 6 June 1929, p. 12).

graduating joined the New Zealand Government Meteorological Office as assistant meteorologist. From this role the New Zealand government nominated him for BANZARE, and on his return from the expedition he rejoined the Meteorological Office. In 1935 Simmers was awarded the Polar Medal, and in 1936 another scholarship, with which he undertook a PhD in meteorology at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. He went on to eventually become director of the New Zealand Meteorological Bureau. Simmers was a Vice-President of the New Zealand Antarctic Society from its founding in 1933, was involved in the Wellington Philosophical Society and local photography associations,

and gave public lectures about BANZARE, his experiences in the Antarctic, and meteorology more generally. He married Anne Penney in 1932, with whom he had two children.<sup>10</sup>

Stephen Pyne characterises BANZARE as one of a trilogy of expeditions which formed the 'big story' of this period of human engagement

<sup>9</sup> Simmers's Master's thesis, 'A Study of the Transformation Temperature of Sulphur by Means of X-Ray Diffraction Photographs', is available in the University of Canterbury's Macmillan Brown Library.

<sup>10</sup> 'Mr. R. G. Simmers Going to Study Meteorology', *Evening Post*, 6 June 1929, p. 12; 'Students "Capped"', *Evening Post*, 11 May 1929, p. 10; 'Personal Items', *Evening Post*, 7 May 1935, p. 11; 'Mr. R. Simmers', *Evening Post*, 17 August 1936, p. 7; 'The Discovery', *Evening Post*, 4 May 1931, p. 10; 'The Far South', *Evening Post*, 26 September 1933, p. 5; 'Round the Pole', *Evening Post*, 16 July 1931, p. 4; 'Camera Club', *Evening Post*, 4 June 1932, p. 4; 'Wellington's Weather', *Evening Post*, 29 August 1935, p. 10; 'Marriages', *Evening Post*, 30 April 1932, p. 1; 'Births', *Evening Post*, 4 January 1935, p. 1; 'Births', *Evening Post*, 13 March 1941, p. 1.

with Antarctica, a period he describes as a 'vital interlude' between the Heroic Era and the International Geophysical Year.<sup>11</sup> BANZARE was so named as it was arranged, funded, and staffed by the governments of Britain, Australia, and New Zealand, with some private donations.<sup>12</sup> New Zealand was by no means an equal contributor to the expedition. It provided only £2,500 towards the expedition's total cost of around £60,000, and only two of the 40 expeditioners, both of them members of the 12-man scientific staff – although L. B. Quartermain considered the 'contribution in manpower [to be] relatively much more significant' than the monetary.<sup>13</sup>

BANZARE was hurriedly organised in the context of a number of countries – the USA, France and, particularly, Norway – taking an interest and making claims in the vast sector of Antarctica that the British Empire, and principally Australia, considered to be 'its' slice. 'Sufficiently well known' Norwegian plans for whalers to explore the Antarctic coastline, and claim swathes for Norway, provided a 'spur to action'.<sup>14</sup> Despite the presence of Heroic Era figures such as Mawson and the photographer Frank Hurley, the 1920s thus produced a new sort of Antarctic explorer: 'a more pragmatic geopolitics quickened in Antarctica,' writes Tom Griffiths, 'and romantic, masculine heroics morphed into harder-edged territorial theatrics'.<sup>15</sup> The expedition's first concern, then, was geopolitical, its second concern economic and commercial (the exploration particularly of whaling possibilities), and only in third place was science.<sup>16</sup>

This order of interests was not widely understood or explained at the time, however. BANZARE was 'touted as being primarily scientific', with the Prime Minister's instructions to Mawson to claim as much land as possible kept a secret even from the expedition's crew until they were in the Antarctic.<sup>17</sup> Simmers records there being 'quite a flutter of excitement at

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<sup>11</sup> The other two parts of Pyne's trilogy are the Wilkins-Hearst and Byrd expeditions. Stephen J. Pyne, *The Ice: A Journey to Antarctica*, Seattle and London, 1986, p. 98.

<sup>12</sup> BANZARE's leader, Mawson, thought the name and acronym 'absolutely ridiculous'. Quoted in Tom Griffiths, *Slicing the Silence: Voyaging to Antarctica*, Sydney, 2007, p. 111.

<sup>13</sup> 'Well-Equipped Ship', *Evening Post*, 27 September 1929, p. 9; L. B. Quartermain, *New Zealand and the Antarctic*, Wellington, 1971, p. 136.

<sup>14</sup> R. A. Swan, *Australia in the Antarctic*, London and New York, 1961, p. 183.

<sup>15</sup> Griffiths, p. 111.

<sup>16</sup> Noel D. Barrett, 'Norway and the "Winning" of Australian Antarctica', *Polar Record*, vol. 45, no. 235, 2009, p. 364.

<sup>17</sup> *ibid*, p. 364; Griffiths, p. 113.

afternoon tea time' when Mawson revealed that he had been empowered to claim land for the Empire.<sup>18</sup> Despite this, the public discourse at the time, and for decades following the expedition, portrayed BANZARE as a scientific expedition, a conviction held by Simmers, and even to an extent by Mawson.<sup>19</sup> 'Although it may seem we haven't done so very well', wrote Simmers after the men learned the land they were sailing for had been claimed for Norway, 'this isn't the case as we have carried out a very comprehensive scientific programme, have sighted land, have done good [depth] soundings and are still in a good position to discover more land'.<sup>20</sup> In his interviews and public lectures upon returning to New Zealand, Simmers continued to discuss BANZARE as a scientific endeavour, and to praise the quality of science that was done.<sup>21</sup> Recent historiography, however, has placed geopolitics back at the top of the list for BANZARE's existence, with science almost nothing more than a cover story for the expedition's departure into the Southern Ocean.<sup>22</sup>

The first voyage, in 1929-1930, sailed from Cape Town and travelled to the Antarctic continent via Kerguelen and Heard Islands, sailed along and charted the continent's coastline between 45° and 73° longitude (including discovering the area named by Mawson Mac. Robertson Land, after BANZARE's principal private funder), undertook a robust scientific programme, and claimed vast areas of the Antarctic for the British Empire. The second voyage, in 1930-1931, departed Hobart and sailed to the continent via Macquarie Island, explored and charted more coastline in what came to be called Adelie Land, Wilkes Land, Mac. Robertson Land, Banzare Land, and Princess Elizabeth Land, and did even more science, including geology, oceanography, zoology, and of course meteorology.<sup>23</sup>

During his two voyages south with BANZARE, Simmers kept two journals. One was purely scientific – a two-hourly log of meteorological observations. The other was a personal diary. In physical form the personal diary takes up two paperback exercise books for the first voyage, and two thick stacks of loose-leaf, lined paper held in semi-rigid bindings for the

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<sup>18</sup> 4 January 1930.

<sup>19</sup> Griffiths, p. 114.

<sup>20</sup> 3 January 1930.

<sup>21</sup> 'In Cause of Science', *Evening Post*, 16 April 1930, p. 12.

<sup>22</sup> See, for example, Griffiths, pp. 109-120, or Barrett.

<sup>23</sup> Swan, pp. 192-201.

second. With this diary, Simmers was operating in a tradition of diaries and journals – what Kathryn Holmes describes as a genre.<sup>24</sup> Within this tradition, Simmers was working within another tradition of the diaries of explorers, and even more particularly of polar explorers, and even *more* particularly of Antarctic explorers. By 1929 there was a literary tradition of writing about the Antarctic environment established by the published diaries and writings of such explorers as Scott, Shackleton, Cherry-Garrard, and even Mawson. In his diary Simmers recorded his actions and the actions of the expedition, described his thoughts and feelings about what they saw and did, and wrote about the new environment in which he found himself. The diary is thus both a tool that Simmers used to try and enforce some familiarity on an unfamiliar environment, and a source in which we can today try and glimpse this process at work.

This is not to suggest that Simmers' diary is a simple, neutral document that captures and presents his thoughts and feelings in the moment of experience. 'Diaries do not just speak for themselves', writes Holmes; they 'do not reveal to us a unified, coherent sense of the writer's "self"'.<sup>25</sup> Simmers' diary is a construction created after the fact of the experiences he writes about. The records are thus reinterpretations of earlier experiences – just as he constructed the environment by projecting himself onto the physical phenomena he witnessed, he constructed his diary by projecting himself onto the physical form of the diary. Simmers was aware of the constructed nature of his diary, frequently calling attention to it within the document. He noted the difference with the diaries of others: he and three other expeditioners compared their diaries, 'excerpts being read, appreciated or derided':

The four are as widely different as it is possible to imagine: Bob's is polished & written with a benedicts caution: Cherub's is a careful chronicle of events interlarded ... with chunks cribbed from books ... Stews is essentially personal & is embarrassingly candid; mine, hence the 'derided' above.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Kathryn Barbara Holmes, *Spaces in Her Days: Australian Women's Diaries, 1919-1945*, unpublished PhD thesis, University of Melbourne, 1992, p. 7.

<sup>25</sup> *ibid*, pp. 7, 13.

<sup>26</sup> 18 January 1930.



Likewise, he acknowledged that the diary was a selected account of the expedition, with no claim to be a complete log of everything that happened:

Among the diary writers the importance of incidents on board is gauged by their suitability for entering in diaries and whenever anything interesting happens there are cries of 'Great diary stuff!' from several quarters.<sup>27</sup>

An important factor in the construction of Simmers' diary is his intended audience. Was he writing for himself in later life; for his family and descendants; for a future historian; for someone else entirely; or some combination of all four? Simmers' imagined audience had a significant impact on what, and how, he chose to record his experiences, thoughts, and feelings. Diarists 'chose the material from which to create [their] persona', writes Holmes, 'shaping, accentuating, defining as [they] desired'.<sup>28</sup> Different parts of Simmers' diary suggest different intended audiences. He occasionally transcribed out pages of entries from sources such as the *Encyclopedia Britannica* and the *South Indian Ocean Pilot*, including maps and diagrams, which suggest he wanted other people to be able to read the journal and understand what he was witnessing. On the other hand, having copied out a song written for New Year's Eve which comically described many of the expeditioners' characteristics and habits, Simmers wrote 'I've put all this song in here as its extremely topical & I hope, will help me to remember more of our individual characteristics & ways', suggesting he also intended the diary to be something for him to read and reminisce over in later life.<sup>29</sup> This question is probably unanswerable, but consideration of it is important in understanding the document Simmers has crafted.

And 'crafted' is certainly the right word. Simmers was very aware of what he was creating, what he thought it should be like, and poured energy into achieving those expectations. He wanted the diary to read well. He

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<sup>27</sup> 7 February 1930.

<sup>28</sup> Holmes, p. 10. In this quote, and others used in this study, Holmes is writing particularly about women diarists. Her arguments used here are general enough to be applied to men as well, however.

<sup>29</sup> Simmers' verse went: 'Our meteorologist Simmers by name / On the Discovery / From the land of the fern & the kiwi he came / On the Discovery / His instruments delicate, those he aint bust / Are all over the ship from the keel to the mast / Talks all the day; / With nothing to say / On the Discovery'. 30 December 1929.

added some mystery to an otherwise pedestrian description of ice slopes on the Antarctic coast, for example, by later adding 'mist shrouded' into the line. Even more telling, he became frustrated when he was not writing well enough. Describing icebergs, he stops abruptly: 'I'd better stop as I'm not doing justice to it'.<sup>30</sup> 'I started writing up the back week tonight,' he complains in another entry, 'but I was doing so badly that I felt like ripping it up'.<sup>31</sup>

Simmers' descriptions and recordings of his experiences in the diary are reinterpreted again by the historian in the archive. Liz Stanley has argued that

all letters are 'dead letters' that in a sense never arrive: the letter that was written and sent is rather different from the one that arrives and is read because [it is] changed by its travels in time and space, from the there and then of writing to the here and now of reading.<sup>32</sup>

The same can be said of Simmers' diary, with an older Simmers, one of his children, and/or an historian as the 'recipients' of the diary. These readers change the diary with their receptions of the text, both through their interpretations of Simmers' words but also through a sense of dramatic irony – we recipients potentially know more about Simmers' situation than he did.<sup>33</sup>

Simmers' diary is clearly a complex document. To complicate it further, the diary has multifaceted relationships with time and space. Space becomes compacted onto the page, and other than usually being on board the *Discovery*, he was not always – perhaps rarely – writing about an experience in the place in which it had happened. A notable exception is the collection of entries for his first visit to Kerguelen Island, which Simmers wrote there – although, he points out, he was writing it three months later, on their second visit to the island. With space folded and stretched, it became even harder for

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<sup>30</sup> 13 January 1930.

<sup>31</sup> 20 November 1929.

<sup>32</sup> Liz Stanley, 'The Epistolarium: On Theorizing Letters and Correspondences', *Auto/Biography*, no. 3, vol. 12, 2004, p. 208.

<sup>33</sup> We may know, for example, about the ongoing battle between Mawson and J. K. Davis, the ship's captain, or that Simmers went on to become director of the New Zealand Meteorological Bureau. This knowledge is especially charming when Simmers complains of dissatisfaction and boredom with meteorology.

Simmers to recapture his precise thoughts and feelings in one moment – or, even easier for other moments to bleed into it and influence the recollection.

Likewise, time is folded and stretched within the diary. An entire day may be covered with a few words, while in the next day's entry description of an event several seconds long may fill an entire page. When the diary is read later – no matter by whom – it also has, in Stanley's words, a 'flies in amber' quality. The reader

of course knows that time has passed and the 'moment of writing has gone; but at the same time, the present tense of the [diary] recurs – or rather occurs – not only in its first reading but subsequent ones too.<sup>34</sup>

Holmes agrees: diaries such as Simmers' 'recapture the moments and fix them in what becomes a continuous present ... The writer's relationship to the time [he or] she records is ever shifting'.<sup>35</sup>

Simmers, for example, was constantly behind in his diary, writing entries days, weeks, or even months after they occurred. 'Up to date at last in my diary!' he celebrated on 19 December 1929. 'The last few days have been tailing along about a week late and have been sourced from hasty notes on odd slips of paper'.<sup>36</sup> Towards the end of the second voyage, time began to crumble even further. 'Tuesday February 18<sup>th</sup>' is written in black ink; then, in blue ink, Simmers wrote:

Yesterday's effort at diary writing has turned out to be my last of the cruise and the remainder of my record is a transcript of scrappy notes I have managed to keep. I am putting them in here in the hope that at some future time they may help to jog my memory regarding some at least of the highlights of the final few weeks.<sup>37</sup>

At the top of the next page a note reads: 'additional notes on the period Feb 18<sup>th</sup>–March 2<sup>nd</sup> are given after March 12<sup>th</sup>'. Turning to the entry for 12 March,

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<sup>34</sup> Stanley, p. 208.

<sup>35</sup> Holmes, p. 15.

<sup>36</sup> 19 December. Many of these slips of paper are still in the diary, slipped in between the cover and first page of each of the books. They have a few (often illegible) words for each day, presumably meant to act as memory jogs.

<sup>37</sup> 18 February 1930.

Simmers has written, 'Found some more notes on the period Feb 18<sup>th</sup>–March 2<sup>nd</sup> which now follow' – but the rest of the diary is blank.

A final temporal complication arising from the diary's form, and Simmers' being behind, is the slipping of tense. Early in the first voyage's diary Simmers explained that he had decided to 'still keep to separate days and present tense'.<sup>38</sup> Writing about the past, however, he often had trouble keeping to the present tense, resulting in passages with breezily shifting tenses:

Even though the barometer had [slipping into the past tense] fallen to 29.2 we have ['have' is written above a 'had', which has been crossed out] had little wind & the light drizzle and snow of the morning cleared [back into past tense] to give a pleasant afternoon.<sup>39</sup>

Simmers' diary, then, is a complex, self-aware, self-referential construction. It is not a clear window into his soul in the moment of experience, but a recollection and reinterpretation encoded within a specific written tradition. Simmers used the diary's text as a way to contain and familiarise the Antarctic environment, using it to construct his Antarctica just as he used it to construct his persona as the writer.

Simmers wrote his diary in a pre-existing tradition of Antarctic and polar explorers' writing. This published writing was itself heavily influenced by the Romantic movement, and so heavily featured literary descriptions of Antarctic and polar environments. Such writing aimed to stir the emotions, to give the reader a sense of how it *felt* to be present in such a place. It made no claims to objectivity, reveling in the individual's subjective experience. Simmers was influenced by this writing, as one of the two major modes in which he engaged with the Antarctic environment, and thus one of the two major voices with which he discusses it in his diary, is literary, emotive, and subjective. Within this mode, a few common devices and themes are evident.

One of the most apparent literary devices Simmers used in his discussion of the environment is personification, the projection of human characteristics onto the environment. On 11 November 1929 a stormy ocean

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<sup>38</sup> 20 November 1929.

<sup>39</sup> 22 November 1929.

calmed, 'perhaps the elements also realising that today is Armistice Day'. Sailing up the Royal Sound on a beautiful day, the environment seemed 'to have done its best to make us welcome', and a nearby mountain had a 'wave worn foot'. Pack ice could be 'treacherous' and gave the expedition 'a taste of its contrariness'. At anchor in a dangerous bay Simmers 'could almost see that glacier front gloatingly beckoning us in and spurring the norwester to greater efforts'. As they headed home on the second voyage, the 'Antarctic turned on a good show' by having an iceberg roll over in the water. Personification extended even more naturally to the living parts of the Antarctic environment. The 'manners' of a seal expelling air through its nostrils 'weren't of the best'. Penguins 'stalked gravely' from the sea to their chicks, and another penguin received the ultimate personification by being named Peter, taken on the *Discovery* as a mascot, and fed potato and butter.<sup>40</sup>

Related to personification, another common device is the language of war and battle. In a challenging environment, it was easy for Simmers (and many before and after him) to cast the expedition and the environment as enemies locked in conflict. The 'convulsive shudder' that ran through the ship when it struck icebergs were reminders of 'what formidable enemies icebergs are'. When forcing its way through pack ice, the ship sometimes 'wins and the floe moves away ... but quite as often the floe wins and we are tossed ... off course. A draw with both adversaries giving ground is the most usual case'. As with personification, wildlife is especially apt to serve as an enemy: walking through a rookery, nesting penguins 'rose upright, heads back in rowdy indignation which increased on closer approach to open warfare in which I received many pecks on my thick trousers'.<sup>41</sup>

Simmers wrote rich descriptions of sound, or the lack thereof, deepening the emotive appeal of his descriptions. Glaciers were 'continually calving off slices of ice which fall into the sea with a reverberating roar'. The 'susich susch' of pack ice along the ship's sides was 'music' to the expeditioners' ears. One evening, the 'the wind had dropped and all was a

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<sup>40</sup> 11 November 1929; 12 November 1929; 26 November 1929; 2 January 1931; 1 December 1931; 18 February 1931; 12 November 1929; 14 December 1929; 23 November 1929; 2 December 1929; 14 December 1929. Personification could also work in reverse, with the environment being projected onto humans: 'Never have I seen anything quite so resembling Miss Yeatman's walk as that of a Penguin. One would think that had seen her' (23 November 1929). Miss Yeatman's identity is unknown, but this does not sound like a compliment.

<sup>41</sup> 11 December 1929; 15 December 1929; 13 January 1930.

serene silence broken by the ush brush of the heaving pack'. Another evening, 'except for the occasional squawk of happy Adelies our passage is silent, the bow ploughing a noiseless furrow'.<sup>42</sup>

A major use of literary language in the diary is Simmers' writing of the picturesque, a mode of description that emphasises the visually attractive qualities of a scene through creative, evocative use of written language. 'Birds are beginning to increase in numbers and we are circled by a flapping, flitting, gliding garland' wrote Simmers in one memorable image. Icy land caught by the sun became 'a dazzling pearl', and sea life dredged from the seafloor was a 'riot of colour ... like an exotic tropical flower-bed'. The *Discovery* wore 'Antarctic clothes', 'a snowy white mantle with beautiful icicle trimmings', and in an abandoned hut Simmers found 'festoons of beautiful sequin like crystals'. Simmers' best picturesque writing was inspired by pack ice. Floating chunks of ice presented 'a veritable fairyland picture as they glint and glisten in the sun'. Pieces of drift ice riding the swell in a setting sun were 'alternately in brilliant light and sombre shade as they rose and fell'.<sup>43</sup> One evening Simmers was particularly stunned by the view, prompting a longer description that is worth quoting at length:

The ship is lying at the edge of loose pack which is far and away the most beautiful we have yet met, and the rays of the low sun, bathing everything in a temperate zone summer warmth, catch on the ice floes as they heave to a gentle swell and, intermittently reflected, cover the pack to the westward with a scintillating silvery mantle. Except for the squawks of porpoising penguins everything is still and placid – the wind is but a breath, solitary seals bask on the floes and Antarctic birds wheel and soar in their strangely silent flight. Despite the swell, the sea has an oily smoothness which reflects contorted images of its floating ice-rafts; far to the East and North lies a girdle of sentinel-like huge flat-topped bergs; to the south east a silhouette of mountain peaks, lightly cloud capped, jut from the even undulations of the ice slopes;

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<sup>42</sup> 26 November 1929; 12 December 1929; 13 January 1930; 8 January 1931.

<sup>43</sup> 12 November 1929; 12 January 1930; 24 January 1930; 6 December 1929; 5 January 1931; 8 January 1931; 13 January 1931.

while, close up, the bare rocky slopes of Proclamation Island contrast pleasingly against their snowy background.<sup>44</sup>

Related to the picturesque is Simmers' use of the sublime, a concept well exercised in Antarctic writing. The sublime, a quality of greatness or magnitude, whether physical, mental, spiritual, or anything in between, was thrilling in a terrifying way. It gave an observer the sense that an individual, or even humanity in general, were inconsequential. As Hains argues,

[t]he paradox of sublime landscapes is that they ought to be beyond human description. Likewise, the wilderness cannot be fully compassed by even the most lyrical and poetic language ... Yet for people to care about wilderness there must be some relationship between the human observer and the wild place ... Antarctica promises to be the most sublime of all wildernesses ...<sup>45</sup>

Such a sense of the Antarctic landscape not only increased appreciation of it, but at the same time made the need for it to be more familiar and understandable all the more urgent. The sublime consequently featured less frequently in Simmers' diary than the picturesque. A notable exception is Simmers' long description of the *Discovery* sailing on a rough sea, in which the comparison between the tiny ship and the enormous rolling waves is striking:

The sight on deck was grand. A bitter wind raging and blowing snow in perfectly horizontal lines while it whitened into surging foam the tips of the huge swell mountains. From the stern the sight is inspiring as the sea is dead aft and seems to move irresistibly on as if it is intent on devouring us in one mighty gulp. On come the rollers towering high above the tiny vessel which however rises on each and falling in the trough a good thirty feet ... One moment the sea seems pleasantly far beneath and the next it is high above just in front, the fall of the ship

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<sup>44</sup> 25 January 1930.

<sup>45</sup> Hains, p. 31.

in the trough and the rise of receding swell making the reversal of positions come about every five seconds.<sup>46</sup>

Otherwise, Simmers' major use of the sublime is in the discussion of icebergs:

Shortly after lunch we came up on a truly magnificent berg – the most spectacular I have seen. Towering to a height of 250 feet it ... [carried] with it all the majesty of a lofty mountain. Sheer bluish green faces dropped abruptly a hundred and fifty feet to a tabular base the sides of which were festooned with a glittering drapery of icicles.<sup>47</sup>

Some icebergs were so big the men thought them to be islands, the 'top peaks being cloud capped'.<sup>48</sup> Another 'looked all the world like a white island possessing hills and valleys & little plains'.<sup>49</sup> Hains argues that 'the sublime represented a quest for antiquity and authenticity in the "New Worlds" as much as a search for beauty, grandeur, or transcendence' – another way of making a new environment familiar. She notes that icebergs in particular thus 'assumed fantastic associations as ruined remnants of civilisation', well demonstrated in Simmers' diary.<sup>50</sup> He described various icebergs as having 'grottoes' and 'pillars', and one, 'the most striking berg we have met on this voyage', 'gave the effect of a castle and tower':

perhaps guarding the icy fastness we had just left – an effect which was enhanced by two mitre-like miniature towers in front of the larger tower for all the world like the pillars supporting an imaginary drawbridge spanning the moat between the castle proper & these outer fortifications.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> 10 November 1929.

<sup>47</sup> 16 January 1931. Simmers took a little while to warm up to writing about sublime icebergs. When they first encountered icebergs, he compared one to 'a toy Teddy Bear floating on its back with arms and legs spreadeagled and wearing a trencher' (8 December 1929).

<sup>48</sup> 26 December 1929.

<sup>49</sup> 19 December 1929.

<sup>50</sup> Hains, p. 35.

<sup>51</sup> 27 January 1930.



The other major mode Simmers used to engage with the Antarctic environment, and thus the other major voice in his diary, was scientific, analytical, controlling, and, to Simmers, 'objective'. In this mode Simmers described what he saw around him in language which was intended to give the reader a clear, objective image of what he witnessed; to explain how or why the environment was the way it was; or to demonstrate human, and particularly British, control over the environment. Hains calls this one of the expeditioners' 'everyday strategies of survival ... another accommodation with the land, the crafting of a close and intimate knowledge of place'. The expedition, as a scientific endeavour, was a 'bold attempt to draw Antarctica into the human realm of science, technology, and economic reason ... [the expedition] brought the tools of the scientist and technician to civilise the Antarctic wilderness'.<sup>52</sup> As a geopolitical operation, BANZARE – and Simmers' diary – deployed controlling writing as part of the official charting, naming, and claiming of the environment.

Examples of Simmers' scientific and analytic voice abound in the diary. Mawson told Simmers one day that a particular iceberg was 'of glacial origin and from a steep coast'. 'This was so', Simmers recorded diligently, 'because the berg was very rugged on top – if it had been from a gently sloping land the glacier would have been so slow moving that the continued snow would have made it tabular & flat topped'.<sup>53</sup> Early another morning Simmers 'was able to watch the formation of sea ice in calm water':

Clear soft liquid ice appears to form to a depth of a few inches all in a few minutes and through it are scattered opaque frondlike white crystals which in this case grey to 2" in length.<sup>54</sup>

Precise descriptions of wildlife, both their form and behaviour, from whales to seals to penguins to seabirds, feature.<sup>55</sup> Other than ice and animals, Simmers unsurprisingly spent a fair amount of time discussing meteorology. He stayed up into the early morning of 24 December 1929 'taking all sorts of

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<sup>52</sup> Hains, pp. 42-43.

<sup>53</sup> 19 December 1929.

<sup>54</sup> 16 December 1929.

<sup>55</sup> 'After some instruction from [fellow New Zealander and the expedition's ornithologist] Bob [Falla] on the poop this morning I am in line for passing the examination for Boy Ornithologist 2<sup>nd</sup> Class'. 7 February 1931.

readings in a blizzard’ and described ‘the first wisps of Cirrus cloud to the N about noon through the various phases of Cirrus, Altostratus and Stratus to the ice crystals which have just ushered in the blizzard proper’. In the same entry he admitted, with a sense of nervousness, to not fully understanding the science behind his observations:

All these different snow & ice modifications are new to me and I feel I am learning something when I strike them. At present I find I am too busy taking observations and learning enough to take them properly to have time to think meteorology and understand properly the physical processes at work down here. Perhaps I would be better to slacken the frenzy of work and get in some much needed swot.<sup>56</sup>

The weather is also so frequently discussed because it is so controlling of BANZARE’s activities. While good weather allowed science to be done and the environment easily traversed, bad weather could (and regularly did) prevent the expedition from doing anything at all. ‘Talk about being at the mercy of the weather’, Simmers mused.<sup>57</sup>

Simmers also judged other aspects of the environment by their compliance with BANZARE’s goals. The provision, or lack, of good anchorages was of importance. The crew ‘did not like Corinthian Bay as an anchorage. And who would?’<sup>58</sup> Another landing, on the continent this time, uncovered ‘a perfect jewel of a boat harbour’.<sup>59</sup> The environment could make it difficult even to get to land. On the first voyage, the *Discovery* spent weeks trying to get through ice to the continent, causing Simmers and a couple of others to write a song for New Year’s Eve 1929 which began:

Oh this is the song of the B.A.N.Z.  
On the Discovery  
The Antarctic Coastline seems totally fled  
From the Discovery  
Bay ice and Bergs and penguins galore

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<sup>56</sup> 23 December 1929.

<sup>57</sup> 19 January 1930.

<sup>58</sup> 1 December 1929.

<sup>59</sup> 5 January 1931.

But no bloody sign of the mythical shore  
But its New Year today; so let us all say  
Here's to Discovery.<sup>60</sup>

The environment could also affect the expedition's success through its impact on the mood of the ship. Simmers noticed 'the whole tone of the ship alter' on 18 December 1929, for example. 'During the thicker pack the general atmosphere was one of depression and criticism,' he explained, 'but now a noticeable cheerfulness is everywhere apparent'.<sup>61</sup> Finally, the Antarctic could of course be very dangerous, threatening to end the expedition entirely. In early January and late December 1930 the men suffered through particularly terrible storms, fearing for their lives. After the second of these Simmers wrote:

At last I can feel that I am not a fraud & an imposter when people at home speak to me of the perils and rigours of voyaging in the Antarctic as today we have had enough nerveracking experiences to satisfy even the thirstiest after adventure.<sup>62</sup>

The Antarctic presented a challenge to Simmers' scientific, analytical approach through its assault on his sense of time. With the familiar seasons absent, the cycle of day and night veering between complete daylight and complete darkness, and being at sea, maintaining a clear sense of time was not easy. Clocks were of course the major way of asserting a familiar sense of time on the *Discovery*, but other tactics were also available. At the personal level, Simmers' daily diary was a way of marking time, striking off each day with an entry – although, as we have already seen, this was not necessarily always successful, with Simmers often running weeks and in some cases months behind. Professionally, he also maintained a meteorological log and took two-hourly meteorological observations, and a few weeks into the first voyage got into the habit of regular bed and rising times.<sup>63</sup> A broader social

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<sup>60</sup> 30 December 1929.

<sup>61</sup> 18 December 1929.

<sup>62</sup> 31 December 1930.

<sup>63</sup> 8pm and 4am respectively – 'Can I keep it up?' he wondered (6 December 1929).

maintenance of time was assisted by the upkeep of social conventions such as Christmas, birthday, and New Year celebrations.

As an expedition explicitly empowered and directed to claim parts of the Antarctic environment for the British Empire, an attitude of control or dominance, and its language, is evident in Simmers' diary. Giselle Byrnes has argued that naming and mapping were two of the major ways that Europeans made a new environment familiar in colonial New Zealand.<sup>64</sup> The same might be said of their activities in the Antarctic. '[P]lace names served to domesticate the environment'<sup>65</sup>, and while mapping and charting were also scientific in purpose they were primarily designed to allow the expeditioners, and the British Empire, to describe precisely what belonged to them. A map demonstrated, formalised and solidified the way the expeditioners and their society thought about the Antarctic environment. Simmers reported with satisfaction that 'the positions of the islands off the south coast [of Kerguelen Island] were definitely fixed', having earlier complained that '[a]ll charts of these Sub Antarctic Islands seem to be uniformly sketchy'.

The proclamation of sovereignty involved building a cairn, reading an official proclamation, raising the Union Jack, singing God Save the King (complete with three cheers), and leaving the proclamation in a sealed tube along with an engraved tablet. Writing about one of these proclamations, Simmers acknowledged the empire-building nature of the act, commenting archly: 'This spot is well well and truly red in the map as I gave my thumb a nasty gash on the point of my knife'.<sup>66</sup> Simmers was aware that claiming land was by no means an objective, uncontested process: 'Geneva is going to be the scene sometime of some interesting argument over the partition of Antarctica and today we have added a nice piece to the complications'.<sup>67</sup> The men were 'all rather staggered by the extent of land claimed' by another proclamation, suggesting some discomfort with their right to claim such vast swathes of an environment.<sup>68</sup> Simmers perhaps felt this discomfort especially. When the ship learnt that the Norwegians had discovered and claimed land that

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<sup>64</sup> Giselle Byrnes, *Boundary Markers: Land Surveying and the Colonisation of New Zealand*, Wellington, 2001. Simmers had a mountain peaked named after him.

<sup>65</sup> *ibid*, p. 86.

<sup>66</sup> 5 January 1931.

<sup>67</sup> 13 January 1930.

<sup>68</sup> 13 February 1931.

BANZARE had been heading for, Simmers found there to be 'altogether too much "Beaten to the land by the Norwegians again" and not enough "Well done. The more we know of the South the better. There's room for all."' <sup>69</sup> For Simmers, science was still the most legitimate reason for their presence in the Antarctic, and their best way of making the environment familiar and understandable.

In his last entry for 1929, Simmers recorded his impressions on looking out from the deck of the *Discovery*. 'The evening did the day full justice, being the most wonderful imaginable,' he wrote. 'No wind, a glassy sea, a few pieces of loose ice and that calm glittering expanse of fast ice over which a low golden sun faintly shone. Who wouldn't come down here to see such sights as these!' <sup>70</sup> Simmers' diary is a complex document. In it we read his descriptions of his thoughts about, feelings towards, and actions within the Antarctic environment. The diary was also a tool in which Simmers used the written word to try and make the strange environment through which he was sailing somehow more familiar and understandable – a process we can observe in process in the diary's text. With its survival in the archive, the diary is thus both a means for us to try and gain a glimpse of Simmers' engagement with the Antarctic environment, and an artifact of that engagement.

Simmers engaged with the Antarctic environment in two major modes, producing two major voices in his diary: a literary, emotive, subjective approach; and a scientific, analytic, controlling, 'objective' one. Although distinguishable, these two modes were, and remain, far from mutually exclusive. This study has pulled them apart and studied them individually, but in reality of course they wove together, overlapping and merging. They were often present, for example, in the same breath: Simmers described part of the Antarctic coast as having 'a mottled black & white appearance as if it was watered silk this in all probability being due to sastrugi'. <sup>71</sup>

Much more research could be done in this area. A useful study might be made of the photographs of the Antarctic taken by the BANZARE men, treating them as a different sort of environmental record with a similar 'flies

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<sup>69</sup> 3 January 1930.

<sup>70</sup> 31 December 1929.

<sup>71</sup> 12 January 1930.

in amber' quality to Simmers' diary. These might be contrasted with the maps and charts created by the expedition – pictorial equivalents of the two voices found in Simmers' diary. A wider study might also place diaries such as Simmers', and the attitude to the Antarctic environment they suggest, in the broader context of attitudes to that environment. A huge amount of work has been done on the thoughts and feelings of men such as Scott and Shackleton – upper class men from the centre of Empire who travelled to a wilderness at the other side of the world – and a comparison with the attitudes of people such as Simmers, from a much more rural, much closer part of the world, would be valuable.

On the day Simmers left the Antarctic for the second, and final, time, he went ashore with a landing party where they conducted another sovereignty proclamation. Simmers was proud of this one, it being 'done properly', unlike many of the others: they were on the actual mainland, the proclamation was read without any mistakes, the ceremonies were conducted correctly, and champagne was poured over the cairn (and elsewhere, presumably). Furthermore, in comparison 'with previous efforts which have been on the tops of hills where voices seem thin & are easily lost in space', this ceremony took place in 'the confined space' of a valley, in which he and the other men's 'voices seemed very loud and cheerful' when they sang. Even – or particularly – in this moment of pleasure, at both a job done right and the simple joy of singing and sounding good, Simmers was aware of the Antarctic environment around him. And then he wrote about it.

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